

‘SISTERHOOD’ IN CHITRA BANERJEE’S ‘SISTERS OF MY HEART’

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ABSTRACT

“A sister is a gift to the heart, a friend to the spirit, a golden thread to the meaning of life.”

Isadora James

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, a post colonialist giant of Indian literature noticed that unlike the male heroes, the women never had any important women friends. This theme eventually became the core point to Divakaruni writing. Most analyses and portrayals of women’s relationships, even by women, have in fact tended to emphasize not female bonding, but female antagonism, not ‘Sisterhood’ but women as women’s worst enemy. On the contrary, women have so much to offer one another but our history is one of mutual inhibition. It is one of the inexorable tragedies of human nature.

Thus the objective of her fiction was to disprove this myth, to destroy the stereotypes. Divakaruni hopes to dissolve boundaries between women of different backgrounds, communities, ages, and even different worlds. Friendship, is an integral part of man’s maturing; for a woman, however, or so fiction usually implies, the real business of a woman’s life is not to develop herself, but to serve the man and by implication the relationships with other women must be relegated to the sidelines as she grows up. That ‘female bonding’ has become a central issue in women’s fiction; today therefore Androgyny is no longer the feminist goal. What is celebrated, instead, is female difference, women’s community, and Sisterhood.

In Sisters of My Heart Divakaruni develops themes relates to the abolishment of female feticide and subtle dowry transactions, intimidating mothers-in-laws, abusive fathers-in-law, caring yet insensitive husbands become some of characteristics of much her writing in India on and by women. (300 words)

KEYWORDS: *Sisterhood, Stereotypes, Women’s Community, Womanhood, Feminism*

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INTRODUCTION

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *Sister of My Heart*, an intensely rich and complex novel, is a virtual tapestry of plots. The underlying tension between the desires of the mothers, who embrace traditional Indian culture, and those of the cousins, who are more enticed by Western philosophies, is central to the evolution of the work. But a greater darkness penetrates the Chatterjee household. The disturbing truth about the circumstances under which Sudha and Anju were born, secretly tortures Sudha and weaves a thread through the friendship. And, when the cousins fall in love and are physically separated by arranged marriages their uncommon bond faces its hardest test. As the novel evolves we follow the women through

their lives, experiencing their jealousy, loss, depression, surprise and prolonged separation and find that these battles and triumphs hold a universal connect with which women of many cultures can easily identify. In the end, the strength of their friendship prevails and the novel culminates in an emotional reunion, one filled not only with intense joy but also with lingering uncertainty.

THE OBJECTIVES

The article proposes

- To destroy myths and stereotypical representations of women
- To deal with the important theme of the emigrant experience and the struggles of people of different backgrounds, communities, ages, and even different worlds.
- To share details of their lives with each other and help each other solve problems that threaten their marriages

In *Sister of My Heart*, Divakaruni tells the moving story of two cousins, Sudha and Anju Chatterjee. Born twelve hours apart in the same house, the women consider themselves twins and from a very early age exact everything they need from life love, respect, counsel, and friendship from each other. Together they experience the joys, pains, mystical tales, and tiresome tasks that accompany growing up in a traditional Indian house in Calcutta. Their exceptional bond remains the core of the novel and throughout the work we are acutely aware of how strongly their affection for each other shapes their lives.

Anju and Sudha were born on the same day, after their fathers had disappeared on a quest to find a fairy-tale cave studded with huge rubies. Their mothers along with a widowed aunt, struggle to educate them as befits daughters of the respected Chatterjee family. When the health of Gowri Ma, Anju's mother, who runs the family bookshop, is failing, she decides to marry off the eighteen-year-old girls as soon as possible. Sudha is as exquisite a beauty as her mother was, when the adventurer Gopal, ran away with her, but she does not have the same dowry as her cousin, who is from the senior branch of the family. The girls are married on the same day. Marriage entails not only their first separation but also their first rivalry with each other, a rivalry not about material possessions but of the heart. Previously they have been cocooned in the matriarchal household, irritated a little at the restrictions on them, and troubled by the mysteries surrounding their fathers, but from birth they have found happiness and total understanding in each other's company.

From the beginning, there are hints about how their futures will diverge. The girls speak the chapters alternately, so that we see life through the eyes of each of them at eight years old, then at twelve, then as convent school girls escaping to the cinema unchaperoned, and finally as married women, one braving a new world and the other in the house of her husband for whom she learns to have affection but not love. All the men in the book have fatal flaws, except Singhji, the Chatterjee family's faithful, deformed chauffeur, who stays with the family as their fortunes fail. The symmetry of the tale, echoing perhaps the duality of much Hindu mythology, is made acceptable by the twists in the plot. Coincidence is waiting behind every door, enabling the girls to expiate the wrongs of their fathers, but the key story is that of the courageous Rani of Jhansi whom Sudha must make her model.

HYPOTHESIS

The article will discuss and relate Chitra Banerjee's representation of women in relation to feminist premises which cater to the objectives and arrive at an understanding if and how Banerjee has translated these gender issues in her thinking and in her depiction of her female protagonist's journey from girlhood to womanhood and then to Sisterhood in *Sisters of My Heart*.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a fashionable Indian-American writer known for her dazzling investigation of South Asian immigrant experiences. She accomplished her literary career in three genres such as poetry, novel and short stories. The present review article attempts to discuss Divakaruni themes, techniques assimilated in her literary works with the help of research carried out on Divakaruni fiction by various researchers. The article entitled "9/11 and The Terror Fear in the Diaspora Community: The Recent Fiction of Chitra Divakaruni" written by Banani Chakraborty conveys the transformation in the position of diasporic community in the United States after the Islamic terrorist attack on America on 11th September 2001 through the novels *Queen of Dreams*, *One Amazing Thing* and *Oleander Girl*. The attack not only shattered American citizens but also dropped its adverse effect on diasporic people due to the security norms by U.S. authorities. Chakraborty, in *Queen of Dreams*, throws light on sufferings of second generation immigrants of America through the characters of the novel. Even though the second generation immigrants like Rakhi in *Queen of Dreams*, Korobi in *Oleander Girl* and Tariq and his family in *One Amazing Thing* accept the lifestyle and livelihood of America, their inner combat aspiring to connect their soul to their origin becomes even more crucial because of the strict security of the nation after the horrific attack is traced in the article.

The article entitled "The Portrayal of Sister-friend in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni *Sister of My Heart*" by C. Bharathi traces out the feeling of sisterhood in a woman towards another woman. The novel is dominated by female characters of three mothers Gouri Ma, Nalini and Aunt Pishi and two young cousins Anju and Sudha. As per review, Divakaruni displays the greater significance to relationships of woman and their potential to gratify the existential motif of life. Edward Said's (1978) '*Orientalism*' led to the progression of the colonial discourse theory which impacted Chitra Banerjee psyche. Bill Ashcroft (1989) '*The Empire Writes Back*', deals with the theory and practice in post-colonial literature gained in modern relevance. Kwame Nkrumah, the first President of Independent Ghana observes that the state which is subject to it is theory and has all the trappings of western sovereignty. M.K Gandhi (1998:176) comments on the ethical paradigm for systematic critique of institutional suffering. Michel Foucault (1971) *Order of Discourse*, where people discuss the desire to be freed from the outside. Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) has clearly had an impact on post-colonial theorists, hegemony and subaltern. Frantz Fanon (1950) offers very useful take point for development in post colonialism. In another book, *Black Skin, White Mask*, 'Fanon writes about the crippling tension between the psychiatrist and the revolutionary.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni makes the lives of these young women as mesmerizing as those of any hapless women in a Mills and Boon story. A welcome difference is that her writing, though sometimes lush, often arrests the reader with telling phrases, as when Anju imagines her unborn baby, no longer than a grape, "clinging tenaciously, cleverly, to my insides." It is a pity that the author's gift for story telling is not matched by equal skill in depicting her principal characters. The supporting women in the older generation, including Sudha's grim, controlling mother-in-law, are realistically sketched. Pishi, the aunt who was widowed young, has in old age a wonderful outburst on the iniquities of traditional attitudes. However, Anju and Sudha remain silly and self-absorbed. We learn little about their daily life as adults because, still in adolescent mode, they are pre-occupied with their inner love agonies. In spite of Anju's early questioning of conversation and Sudha's vivid imagination, their aims in life are centered first on finding perfect union with the right man, and then on making dreams come true for their children. Perhaps the point is to show the enfeebling results of a culture of feminine

dependency, but why make the young women so limited when their elders are strong? The hint of other futures for them at the end comes too late to sustain sympathy with them or the genre Divakaruni has adopted.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni believes that the major theme in all her writing is 'Sisterhood' - that mysterious female bonding that goes far deeper than familial ties and which insistently surfaces in women's relationships despite all patriarchal conditioning. In the 'Author Speak Column' of the January 25, 1999 issue of India Today, Arthur J. Pias, (1999) quoting Banerjee's remarks of how Indian women in history, myth and epic continue to provide role models today, traces of fascination that 'female bonding' has had on her childhood experiences. (73) Divakaruni (1999) agrees. In "What Women Share," an essay in *Bold Type* of February 19, 1999, she describes how often her grandfather told her stories from Indian epics and how she had always searched in them for that sense of sisterhood she knew must have existed among those great women, for "the aloneness of the epic heroines seems strange to me even as a child. I could see that this was not how women around me lived," whether in the villages or in middle-class Calcutta." (1) The women of the epics, she saw, related only to the men around them: even when they did have women friends these friendships inevitably broke up when a man entered the scene. "It was as though the tellers of these tales (who were coincidentally, male) felt that women's relationships with each other were only of significance until they found a man to claim their attention and devotion.

This is in fact only too often the case not only in the Indian epics but in most fiction in general, in India or in the West, whether written by men or by women. Male friendship has been an essential ingredient in the development of the (male) protagonist in fiction. Indeed, Leslie Fiedler (1997) even suggests in *Love and Death in the American Novel* that it enables the protagonist to brow out of the feminine lies of his early youth. Friendship, then, is an integral part of man's maturing; for a woman, however, or so fiction usually implies, the real business of life is not to develop herself, but to get her man, which means that relationships with other women must be relegated to the sidelines as she grows up. It is perhaps not surprising that male writers should overlook the role of friendship in the lives of their women characters, for female bonding is part of the "wild zone" of female experience inaccessible to men in general; what is more is that sisterhood has usually been absent in women's writing as well, at least until recently, when feminists began to see female bonding as a challenge to and an escape from patriarchy.

Most analyses and portrayals of women's relationships, even by women, have in fact tended to stress not female bonding, but female antagonism, not sisterhood but women-as-women's-worst-enemy. "What human relationship contained as much ambiguity and ambivalence as women with women?" asks Nancy Friday (1997) in *My Mother/ My Self*. "We have so much to offer one another, but our history is one of mutual inhibition. It is one of the inexorable tragedies of human nature." (201) Perhaps this is because in a patriarchal/misogynist society men are identified with seriousness and women with triviality, and this fear of trivializing themselves discourages women from reaching out to each other as, for instance, Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* suggests: or perhaps men in patriarchy can only feel secure by making women feel inferior, and women, accordingly, try to overcome their sense of inferiority by identifying not with other inferior women but with the dominant male to whom they are only too willing to subordinate themselves. (Firestone 132)

Much of Divakaruni's work deals with the immigrant experience, an important theme in the mosaic of American society. Her book *Arranged Marriage* is a collection of short stories about women from India caught between two worlds. In *The Mistress of Spices*, the character Tilo provides spices, not only for cooking, but also for the homesickness and alienation that the Indian immigrants in her shop experience. In *Sister of My Heart*, two cousins, one in America, the other in India, share details of their lives with each other and help each other solve problems that threaten their marriages.

Divakaruni writes to unite people. Her aim is to destroy myths and stereotypes. She hopes to dissolve boundaries between people of different backgrounds, communities, ages, and even different worlds. She says:

Women in particular respond to my work because I'm writing about them, women in love, in difficulty, women in relationships. I want people to relate to my characters, to feel their joy and pain, because it will be harder to [be] prejudiced when they meet them in real life (quoted in softky).

Her interest in women began after she left India, at which point she came to reevaluate the treatment of women there. At Berkeley, she volunteered at a women's center and became interested in helping battered women. She then started Maitri with a group of friends, which eventually led her to write *Arranged Marriage*, a work that includes stories about the abuse and courage of immigrant women.

This viewpoint in particular has generally been expressed by most contemporary women writers, in fiction (in Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale* for instance) or in popular journalism. Thus Sheila Kumar in two consecutive articles in *Femina*, discusses *Why We Love-Hate Our Mothers* (January 15, 1999) and *Why Women Judge One Another So Harshly*, (February 15, 1999) and concludes that the ambiguities in women's relationships grow out of their patriarchal conditioning. The mother-daughter bond should be as she observes in *My Mother's Daughter and Me*, "As much about sympathy, understanding and support as it is about love". (36-38) Yet the mother is the person most directly responsible for curbing the daughter's independence, for forcing her to adjust and accept the patriarchal norms she has internalized herself, even though she may do it out of love and fear for her daughter. The daughter in turn channelizes all her resentment of patriarchy towards her mother. The relationship of "sisterhood in its purest form" (38) degenerates into one fraught with insecurities, resentment, guilt and turbulence all the more destructive because it must be hidden. Similarly women are harsher on other women because in our social set-up it is easier for the weak to condemn the weak than to fight the strong. ("*The Suspicious Sisterhood*" 40)

More than eighty years ago Charlotte Perkins Gilman showed that this may not be so. Her utopian *Herland* (1950) projected a woman's land perfect and complete without men: even when three men force their way into it and try to disrupt relationships by rape and by marriage. What changes here, is not the feeling of sisterhood but male perceptions of gender. Gilman's contemporary Kate Chopin in *At Fault* and *The Awakening* used friendships among women not so much to present inadequate support systems for the lonely protagonist but to offer optional-lifestyles; the protagonist in each case may not accept them, but she is enabled to recognize that what the men in her life offer her are not only unsatisfactory but also demeaning and exploitative. It was not until women writers realized that women define themselves through a network of relationships, while men do so through separation, *2 (Chadorow 189) that female bonding became a central issue in women's fiction, today therefore Androgyny is no longer the feminist goal, what is celebrated, instead, is female difference, women's community, sisterhood. Marilyn French makes Anastasia, the protagonist of *Her Mother's Daughter* point out this change of direction when she says, "I believed freedom was independence, needing no one, having your work and doing what you damn well wanted to do. And what this was what the heroic man – or woman did. . . That's what I felt. Until very recently". (674)

Not, of course, that contemporary women's fiction provides only an idealized picture of women's friendship; on the contrary, women writers, whether they call themselves feminists or not, certainly do not perceive women's relationships uniformly or uncritically. If May Sarton's Laura in *A Reckoning* admits that "one of the real connections, one of the deepest, and most nourishing, in some ways more than my marriage, good as that was, had been a passionate

friendship with a woman,” (243) Atwood’s *Bodily Harm*, *Cat’s Eye* and *The Robber Bride*, Fay Weldon’s *Female Friends and Praxis*, Andrea Work-in’s *Ice and Fire* and Emma Tennant’s *Bad Sister* examine the rivalries, the antagonisms and the lack of communication between women. The difference in the contemporary position lies in the seriousness with which this theme is explored and the belief in the centrality of female bonding to female identity; and existence.

The Indian woman’s treatment of sisterhood in fiction, interestingly enough, has not quite followed this Western pattern of development. Traditional Indian society, which has carefully segregated its men and women, has equally carefully nurtured the social stereotypes that prevent female bonding: the mother-son relationship has been valorized, the brother-sister is one that is privileged, but the mother-daughter one is overlooked, and women’s friendship is marginalized. In the artifacts of popular culture-fiction, films, television serials, commercials – the feminine mystique is a suitably Indianized version of Betty Friedman’s account. Mother and daughter or sisters come together only to counter the threat posed by a new daughter/sister-in-law or to reinforce the stereotypes of the *Sati-Savitri* syndrome, and women’s friendships, when they do survive marriage or are formed after marriage, must be subservient to and certainly underscore the rights and the demands of the husband and his family. Women’s relationships in contemporary Indian fiction, then, are governed by the power of politics of patriarchy, not by sisterhood. From Anita Desai to Arundhati Roy, Indian women novelists in English, who are expected to be close to the West-inspired women’s movement, either ignore sisterhood in their focus on androgyny or show that patriarchy ensures that it cannot exist; witness, for example, Desai’s *Voices in the City*, Nayantara Sahgal’s *Day in Shadow*, Shobha De’s *Snapshots*, Manorama Mathai’s *Mulligatawny Soup*, Indira Malhotra’s *Club*, Arundati Roy’s *God of Small Things*. They remain mired, as it were, in the Western feminism of the sixties and seventies, while western women novelists, however, have moved on.

When Divakaruni declares then, that she has made sisterhood her theme, she has clearly put herself squarely in the tradition of the West rather than of India in particular. Certainly her fiction is part of the growing corpus of Asian American women’s writing, whose major theme is the lonely outsider, the first or second generation Asian immigrant in an often hostile, uncomprehending and incomprehensible environment, struggling to assimilate and to keep her ethnic identity alive at the same time, suffering the double yoke of color and gender even more than the African American, for whom the USA has always been the only home she has ever known. For Asian or African American women, sisterhood is a strength and succor, enabling them to discover themselves as persons and to nurture their ties with their community; friendship with other women becomes, therefore, central to the fiction of all American “women of color.”

For Divakaruni, who has known first hand the terrible isolation of the newly arrived Asian woman in America and has seen for herself the trauma of the unassimilated immigrant, and who has helped to found Maitri – the name itself is significant – a woman’s self service organization in San Francisco, (Pais 73) sisterhood has been both an inevitable choice of theme and an important political statement. With the exception of two short stories in *Arranged Marriage* (“Bats” and “The Maid Servant’s Story”), all her fiction centers on Indian immigrants and their uneasy relationships with the unfamiliar world they have found themselves in; each one of them is, moreover, a woman-centered story, even if, as in *The Disappearance*, the point of view is not the woman’s. Throughout her work runs the conviction shared by most Asian American women writers, that it is only in this new world, in spite of all the pain and alienation it brings, in spite of the bitterness of the realization that the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow might elude her forever, that she can find her selfhood and real sisterhood. This has of course not always endeared Divakaruni to Indian reviewers; see the caustic comments of Samrat Upadhaya about *Arranged Marriage* (“Arranged Marriage: Between Third World & First”) or Mini Kapoor about *Sister of My Heart*. (“Accidental Magic”)

But Divakaruni's theme also connects her, paradoxically enough, with the early and obviously prefeminist Indian woman novelists, with whom, in fact, the Indian novel itself had begun. Most nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Indian women's novels celebrate sisterhood as a mode of survival and means to selfhood in a closed world whose burden they accept unquestioningly as the woman's lot. This is the most striking difference between the prefeminist Indian woman's novel and the feminist/post feminist one; its belief in power of female bonding in a world in which women are powerless.

In what is arguably the first Indian novel, Hannah Catherine Mullen's Bengali *Phulmoni o Karunar Bibaran* (published in 1852, it predates Peary Chand Mitra's *Alaler Gharer Dulai* by six years), the Christian virtues preached by the missionary novelist come alive in the relationships of the two protagonists, Phulmoni and Karuna, with the women of their village, which, in spite of its poverty and illiteracy, its jealousies and petty quarrels, provides its women a network of moral and emotional support. Sharat Kumari Choudhuran's *Shubha-Bibaha* (1906), again, portrays woman's world, this time of middle class urban women, confined to houses in which their domain is strictly demarcated but which enables them to reach out to each other in sisterhood, and in so doing achieve far greater success as human beings than the men who straddle the outside and bigger world. Novel after novel by Bengali women of the past continue to provide portraits of a constricted and limiting women's community in which its members triumph over the psychological bondage of masculine domination through friendships that provide both a source of personal fulfillment and a challenge to patriarchal attitudes. The most striking examples of this kind of female bonding are to be found interesting in the sentiment melodramas of the two women who epitomize feminine internalization of patriarchy, Nirupama Devi and Anurupa, whose Shyamali, Didi and Ma, for instance, project proud strong women whose strengths and victories grow out of their empathy and bonding with other women, especially, and most notably, with their rivals for masculine favours. Shut in by men, women in turn shut out men, and form lasting female bonds within a women's community that are sometimes shaken but never entirely ruptured by male intrusions; this women's community in the early Bengali women's novel has however, disappeared today as women fight, and often successfully, to voice their silence and centralize their marginalization. But this breaking down of patriarchal walls has left them as vulnerable to patriarchal manipulations, without the support of female bonding; hence the continuing power of the patriarchal stereotypes of rivalry and antagonism and the absence of sisterhood in contemporary women's fiction.

I particularly mention the Bengali women's novels not merely because the Indian novel itself began with women writing in Bengali; I do so because Divakaruni herself is a Bengali whose work is firmly rooted in Bengali soil (albeit in a Bengal now alive only in the memories of expatriates). Not only are most of her characters Bengali, in many if not most cases, she retells and re-visions the old Bengali women's stories in contemporary Asian American terms, stories through which, incidentally, women's community and sisterhood emerge as important motifs when they have been told by male novelists like Rabindranath Tagore, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Kalpalkundals* and Devi Choudhurani and by old grandmother's tales of pirates and strange islands and magical transformations which reverberated through the pages of children's magazines like *Shishusathi* and *Shuktara* forty and fifty years ago. That Divakaruni also throws in a dash of Rider Haggard's 'She' is of course another matter.

Sister of My Heart develops from the novelist's own short story, *The Ultrasound*, but despite the contemporary touches, notably, of course, the ultrasound sex-determination test that leads to a demand for female feticide and the cliché of "subtle dowry transactions, hectoring mothers-in-laws, abusive fathers-in-law, caring yet insensitive husbands" (Kapoor 4), characteristic of much writing in India on and by women, the way in which Divakaruni focuses on what she calls "the

particular nature of women's friendships, what makes them special and different" ("What Women Share" 3), it is very much in the tradition of prefeminist Bengali women's fiction. It reads, in fact, like an updated version of a Nirupama Devi/Anurupa Devi novel, while its combinations of female friendship and mysterious pasts and secret treasure also links it to the more contemporary Lila Majumdar novella "Pakhi" in *Ami Nari*, not to mention (the male) Tathagata Mukhopadhyaya's *Antaral*, serialized in 1996 in the Bengali women's magazine *Sananda*. The point is not the number of literary influences on Divakaruni nor that her work might well be regarded as a pastiche of older Bengali texts (although, of course, this would not necessarily amount to a pejorative assessment of her achievements which is considerable), but that, even though she might believe that her writing is an act of "rebellion" ("What Women Share" 3) against traditional Indian indifference to women's relationships, her theme of women's friendship is not strange to Indian, or, perhaps more appropriately, Bengali, writing.

Nevertheless, she is right about one thing at least, in those days, outside the extended family, it would not be possible for them to bond so closely to someone quite unrelated to them by blood or marriage, to become sisters of the heart, not blood, in Divakaruni's phrase. No wonder, then, that the old Indian stories do not mention such friendships. And among Divakaruni's own examples of her theme of sisterhood of the heart, while in *Affair* and *Meeting Mrinal* Abba and Meena on the one hand; Asha and Mirnalini on the other are certainly dear friends, and not relatives, Anju and Sudha in *Sister of My Heart* (like Anju and Arundhati in *The Ultrasound*) are cousins belonging to the same patrilineal family and in the Indian context would obviously be called "Sisters" (There is, moreover, no Indian equivalent of the word cousin), not "friends", Clearly Divakaruni has addressed her novel to a Western audience for whom this kind of bonding would be as foreign as this kind of family for sure.

Sister of my Heart exhibits, in fact, many of the features of novels dealing with the bonds between sisters, such as Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*, Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* and *Good Wives*, Shobha De's *Sisters*, Marilyn French's *Her Mother's Daughter* and Alice Walker's *Color Purple* (the sisterly bonds explored in the last two novels are of course not the main theme but a part of their core analysis of women's relationships with each other). Most such novels depict sisters as being very different but as sharing nonetheless a deep primal, nonverbal and inexpressible bond, a bond which makes each one a kind of Dostoevskian double of the other and which somehow survives the continual tension between them over their other relationships, especially if, as usually happens, one of them is prettier, cleverer, more talented, or more fortunate than the other. Like the sisters in all these novels, Anju and Sudha Chatterjee in *Sister of My Heart* are very different in appearance, temperament and achievements, and grow up together under similar yet very different conditions: their fathers, cousins themselves, died together in the same accident, but where Anju's father was the master of the house and her mother from an equally aristocratic family, Sudha's father was a poor relation, her mother's background nondescript, lower middle-class. Sudha and her mother continue to live in the family mansion not out of ancestral right but because Indian family ties would not have it otherwise. The girls do everything together and love one another fiercely, demanding to be known not just as sisters but as twins, and not just because they were born on the same day (16-19); sisterhood to them is not just a matter of tie of blood but of love. As Anju tells Sudha: "I would love you because you love me. I would love you because no-one else knows us like we know each other." (p.51) they may be separated by fate and marriage once they reach adulthood, but they let nothing stand in the way of their love for each other, even jeopardizing the love of the men in their lives for each other. It is perhaps this that makes Divakaruni call *Sister of My Heart* a novel of women's friendship, not of sisterly bonding: Similarly, *Affair* and *Meeting Mrinal* are as much about the woman's quest for selfhood as about friendship, but Divakaruni perceives the latter to be their main theme.

Women friendships in Western fiction have undoubtedly suffered when women have weighed them against feminine duties and responsibilities towards parents, lovers and husbands, and children. Thus in Jane Eyre, the protagonist must outgrow her friendship with Helen Burns before she can enter the world of adulthood; and Helen must die, and Mr. Rochester's other; women, Bertha Mason, Celine Varens and Blanche Ingram be silenced, marginalized, and defeated in order that Jane can triumphantly take her position as his wife and the mother of his children. More than a century; later Toni Morrison set out to write what she believes is the first novel about female friendship; note how Morrison's comments anticipate Divakaruni's by about twenty years:

Friendship between women is special, different, and has never depicted as the major focus of a novel before Sula. Nobody ever talked about friendship between women unless it was homosexual, and there is no homosexuality in Sula. Relationships between women were always written about as though they were subordinate to some other roles they're playing (Tate, 118).

Sula Peace and Nel Wright grow up together in a small black neighborhood in Medallion, Ohio, the closest of friends because they have so much in common and also because they are very different, their very differences complementing each other. So Nel marries and settles down to a conventional life in the Bottom, and Sula begins her experiments with life and the quest for selfhood, which includes sexual encounters with Nel's husband. Nel cannot accept this betrayal on Sula's part, and Sula is in turn shocked that Nel should feel this way: "They had always shares the affection of other people... she was ill prepared for the possessiveness of the one person she felt close to." (P.119) But after Sula dies, Nel realizes in an epiphanic moment that what has been most important for her existence is her friendship with Sula, who has gone out of her life for ever.

Morrison shows in Sula, then that sisterhood is deeper, more permanent, than a woman's Relationship with a man, but Sula must die before Nel can realize the meaning of her loss and rise above her jealousy over her best friend's relationship with Jude. For Celie in Alice Walker's Color Purple there is no conflict at all between sisterhood and other relationships, she has never loved Albert and so never resents in the least the sexual intimacy he shares with Shug. Divakaruni's women, however, face a different situation. They love their men, or they believe they do, and they suffer agonies of jealousy and misery when they feel they have been betrayed by friend with husband, but they quickly realize that they love their women friends more than their men, a love that surpasses all other relationships. It is in her short stories and in *Sister of My Heart* that Divakaruni most obviously explores this theme; sisterhood is not central to *The Mistress of Spices*, though love and caring are.

In *Affair*, Abha, the narrator, is shocked to learn from her husband that Meena, her best friend, is having an affair, although she herself has always been conventional and prudish about these things, not even because she begins to suspect that the affair is with Ashok, her own husband, but because Meena had not told her about the affair herself.

How could you have done this to me, Meena? At first I wasn't sure if I meant the affair itself, or the fact that it was with Ashok, or that she had kept it from me. Then I knew; I could have forgiven her the first one, and even the second, if only she hadn't done the third. (P.266)

Like Nel and Sula, Abha and Meena have always shared their lives together, even moments that no one else has known about, and Abha is miserable and jealous - but the focus of the jealousy is different; Meena has betrayed their friendship by withholding the news of the affair from her, and not by any supposed liaison with Ashok. Friendship to her is more important than her man.

But the shock also jolts Abha into a reappraisal of her own life; she decides to dress differently, even though her daring new robe arouses Ashok's mockery, she takes up an assignment that is more demanding and challenging than her usual unadventurous routine, and she learns to accept some uncomfortable truths about herself. She has been too engrossed in role-playing to engage in the things that really matter," I'd been too busy being a good wife" to love Ashok (P.249), and he has been an unsatisfied and unsatisfactory sexual partner. When she meets Meena to sort out matters with her, she is still angry and jealous, but she discovers much more than whom her friend is actually having an affair with - and it is certainly not Ashok, for Meena would never betray Abha in that fashion - She discovers self-respect, self-esteem. Meena, whom she had always admired, actually admires her, and longs for her approval, but also, more importantly, she realizes that Meena's empty life with Srikant was like her own with Ashok, and that Meena's attempt to "be [her] self, like[she] never could before this" (p.269) was something that she herself should emulate. Like her friend, therefore, Abha decides to leave husband, home and family acceptance for the unknown and uncertain pursuit of self-fulfillment and self-empowerment.

CONCLUSIONS

In *Sister of My Heart*, Divakaruni expands and complicates this story with additional details to emphasize the depth of their bonding, but the end-result does not perhaps always have the effect she had in tended. For instance, she suggests that the cousins may not actually have been cousins at all, that Anju's father, Bijoy had been deceived by Sudha's father Gopal about their relationship. Though this is proved wrong at the end, it should have helped to establish the fact that their love is far deeper than the ties of blood. Anju who knows nothing of the tenuousness of their kinship or of what Sudha's father had done, his treachery and complicity in Anju's father's death is sure that their sisterhood can never be broken; but it is clear that much of her certainty is due to her ignorance. Besides as the social superior and more intellectually gifted of the two, it is easy for her to be generous. But Sudha remains consumed by guilt for what her father has done and by her conviction that she must atone for his sins by putting Anju first (p.60); when therefore she decides to sacrifice her own happiness for Anju's sake it is uncertain whether she does it out of a sense of filial duty or out of love for a sister of the heart. Indeed, when she has to choose between her mother and her cousin when it comes to consenting to an early marriage instead of going to college with Anju, she chooses her mother, although, of course, it is a painful decision for her. Besides, she is always a very passive person, as contrasted to Anju's energy and initiative, and her reluctance to elope with Ashok, the man she loves, seems as much due to her fear of action and her preference for going with the tide rather than her love for Anju, which makes her worry that this elopement might break up Anju's engagement to Sunil.

Anju however is a true sister of the heart for Sudha. Divakaruni makes Anju and Sudha speak alternately in their own voices, constantly shifting perspective. The narrative technique itself underlining their twinning as much as the events of their lives, and Anju's voice is always clear and unambiguous. The richer, the cleverer and the more talented of the two, but perhaps the less imaginative and sensitive, she has always stood by Sudha, doing what she thinks is best for her, being willing even to sacrifice her relationship with Sunil in her obsessed belief that she must have Sudha by her side if her sister-friend has to thrive. It is appropriate, then, that a novel of sisterhood should end with Anju's thoughts:

We've formed a tableau, two women, their arms entwined like lotus stalks, smiling down at the baby between them. Two women who have traveled the vale of sorrow, and the baby who will save them, who has saved them already. Madonnas with child...for now the three of us stand unhurried, feeling the way we fit, skin on skin on skin, into each other's lives. (340)

Sister of My Heart is a disappointment after the magical *Mistress of Spices*. Perhaps this is because Divakaruni has set out to prove a thesis, not tell a story, and her creativity constantly subverts the surface narrative and fractures the rigid framework she has sought to impose on it. *Arranged Marriage* and *Mistress of Spices* are successes because they are so flexible, so inclusive; there could have been much more to *Sister of My Heart* than Divakaruni has allowed. Or perhaps this is because the novelist has not realized that her underlying theme is not merely sisterhood but female bonding in all its forms, which constantly makes its presence felt through the images and through the lyricism and the romantic fantasy that breathe through her fiction. This is where her greatest achievement lies. She had discovered this in the *Mistress of Spices* as much as in her short stories; she needs to rediscover this in the future.

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